

Interactive comment on “Community development and social actor theories: a case study in Montréal (Canada)” by G. Sénécal

Anonymous Referee #2

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This paper generates some provocative remarks on collective action and community development. A key objective of the paper is to draw attention to a range of social theories which might be able to better inform the processes of community development. Empirically, the paper explores the programmes and processes aimed at community development in a district in the north of Montreal, Villeray. Overall, the paper could have been more transparent on the connections between the theoretical arguments it makes and the unfolding processes in Villeray. Part of the problem here lies in the number of theories the author introduces; part of it arises from the opaqueness with which arguments are sometimes expressed; finally, part of it lies in the brevity with which the example is discussed and the discussion and conclusions are drawn. In effect, the latter criticism reflects the imbalance of the paper between the space devoted to introducing the theories and then demonstrating their place empirically. Overall, then,

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the paper does not live up to its expectations strongly enough, particularly in making it clear as to the originality of its contribution to the literature.

The exploration of the meaning of social actors and the part they play in the community development process is laudable. At the outset the author rightly attempts to define what we mean by social actor. There are problems with its inclusive definition – that it “refers to all stakeholders, individuals or groups, within civil society or public institutions involved in processes and carrying out initiatives in support of community development or urban revitalization” (p. 62, 14). In fact, by bracketing civil society and public institutions the author appears to be conflating actors that come from very different sides of the community development process, the community and public officials involved in it. Where, subsequently, the discussion centres on public participation, this conflation tends to be at odds with actors who in practice occupy very different positions and bring very different skills and resources to the process – community residents and officials of public institutions such as local governments. Of course, in a sense all of these are actors, but who they are, what interests they represent etc can often be the source of tensions in community development. Perhaps it would have been more to the point to approach community participation more from one ‘side’ or the other – viewing it from the position of community activists or from the direction of actors representing the public institution charged with the responsibility of ensuring community development.

The range of theories introduced is ambitious, perhaps overly so. I do not intend to comment on each of the theories, but in some instances it was not immediately apparent as to what were the connections between the paper’s objectives and the introduction of specific theories, such as the role of non-human actors (Callon). There are significant points to be made here, but the author does not really make these clear. Equally, (for example) in the case of Habermas and the theory of communicative action the problems apparent in arguing the “actor as ..a deliberating subject seeking to defend the public interest”, essentially a normative explanation, are evident when it comes to looking at real-world interactions between different actors.

The multiplicity of different perspectives become handled by the author through the device of ‘tinkering methodologies’. While I profess such methodologies are new to me, their potential does hold out interesting prospects. But its use would also appear to carry certain dangers, of mixing different theoretical arguments and the premises on which they are based. I would want greater assurance that the methodology is able to avoid the pitfall of using differently positioned theoretical arguments where such a bringing together was problematic. The problems of such mixing are drawn attention to by the author. Notwithstanding these, the different perspectives are used “to develop a classification of the different types of actor”, a mission that itself carries certain dangers.

The empirical discussion includes some fascinating programmes aimed at the development of this area of Montreal. The Social Forum and the Table de Concertation were particularly interesting and also challenging. The Table – an intersectoral discussion forum- seems to present a programme whose deliberations and outputs might be more fully explored through Habermas and Healey’s ideas on communicative planning. Perhaps this is the way forward with this research, that the author takes one of these theories, identifies where a ‘gap’ in its reasoning and/or empirical verification is present and uses this as the means of exploring community participants as actors and their effectiveness in bringing about improvements to their local space.

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